

Identidad

"You reach out, and no one's there

Like a god without a prayer."

Hong

The morning didn't start with an alarm. It started with a weight.

A soft, squirming weight being deposited onto my mattress, followed by the sound of my bedroom door clicking shut.

"Your turn," my sister's voice drifted through the wood, cheerful and unapologetic. "I have to get ready. Don't let him fall off."

I groaned, burying my face in the pillow. I wasn't due at Ink & Ashes until later, and the sun was barely piercing the curtains. But the weight on the bed shifted, and a small, warm hand patted my cheek.

"Uncle Hong," a tiny voice whispered. "Wake up."

I cracked one eye open. Kevin was staring at me, his eyes wide and bright, looking far too awake for this hour.

"Too early." I mumbled, reaching out to hook an arm around his small middle. I dragged him down until he was tucked against my chest, the duvet pulled up over both of us. "Five more minutes. The monsters under the bed are still sleeping."

Kevin giggled, but he settled down, burrowing into the warmth. We drifted there for a while, in that hazy, comfortable space between sleep and wakefulness. It was the only time my apartment was this quiet, before the city woke up, before the tattoo machines started buzzing, before the texts started coming in.

Eventually, the hunger won out. Specifically, Kevin's hunger.

"Toast?" he asked, poking my nose.

"Toast." I agreed, resigning myself to the day.

We shuffled into the kitchen. I kept it simple—my culinary skills weren't exactly Michelin-star level, unlike some people I knew. I scrambled some eggs, threw bread in the toaster, and poured two glasses of orange juice.

I sat Kevin at the table, but he was in a wiggly mood, climbing onto my lap instead.

I picked up my phone while we ate. A notification from Lego popped up.

Photo attached.

It was a stack of pancakes that looked like they belonged in a magazine. Strawberries, bananas, perfect lighting.

Good morning! Made pancakes!! Hope your day is as fluffy as these look.

I looked at my slightly rubbery scrambled eggs. Then I looked at the picture again.

"Look at that, Kav." I showed the screen to the kid. "Uncle Lego makes better food than me."

"Yummy." Kavlin agreed, reaching out with a small, sticky hand to try and steal a piece of my toast while I was distracted.

I snapped a picture of it—his little hand creeping into the frame, the half-eaten eggs, the contrast to Lego's perfection.

Me: Morning! Your pancakes look better than mine...

I sent it, smiling at the screen. Lego's reply was instant.

Lego: OMG whose hand is that???

Me: My sister's kid. I'm on babysitting duty this morning. a menace.

He wasn't a menace, obviously. He was currently chewing on toast with the solemnity of a judge. But I liked making Lego laugh.

Getting ready was an operation.

"Green dinosaur!" Kavlin demanded, pointing at his clothes pile.

"Green dinosaur it is." I said, wrestling him into the t-shirt. It had a T-Rex on it wearing sunglasses. Kid had style.

For myself, I went practical. Black cargo pants, a grey oversized t-shirt. Clothes that I didn't mind getting stained with stencil ink or sweat. I splashed water on my face, ran a hand through my silver hair, and grabbed my backpack.

"Ready to rock?" I asked.

"Ready!"

We headed out. The walk to the kindergarten wasn't far, but my nephew's legs were short, and he had a tendency to stop and inspect every interesting rock on the pavement.

"Up." he commanded after two blocks.

I swung him up into my arms without breaking stride. He was getting heavier, but he fit perfectly against my hip, his small arms wrapping around my neck.

The morning air was fresh, the city just starting to hum. I felt steady. Grounded.

As we neared the school gate, I shifted him to one arm and pulled out my phone again. I snapped a quick selfie of us—me looking slightly disheveled, my nephew grinning with his dinosaur shirt front and center.

I sent it to two people.

First, to my sister.

Me: [Photo attached] The menace is being contained at kindergarten. Green dinosaur for luck.

Then, to Nut.

Me: [Photo attached] Drop off successful. Have a good day at work.

he replied with a heart emoji almost immediately.

Finally, I checked my messages. A text from Tui popped up.

I hit reply and typed a single emoji.

Then I put the phone away.

"Okay, buddy." I said, setting him down at the gate where his teacher was waiting. "Be good. Don't bite anyone."

"Bye Uncle Hong!" He waved, already running toward his friends, the green dinosaur a blur of motion.

I watched him go, hands in my pockets.

Now, to the studio.

I checked the time. I had a few hours before my first appointment. Maybe I could convince Lego to grab lunch later. He seemed cheerful this morning with his pancakes, but I knew today was William's session with Est. Lego worried. He always worried.

I'd make sure he ate something real.

The bus was half-empty at this hour.

Mid-morning, past the rush of commuters, not yet into the lunch crowd. I found a window seat near the back and watched the city slide past—shopfronts opening their doors, street vendors setting up their carts, the ordinary rhythm of a day in motion. My sketchbook was open on my lap, but I wasn't drawing. Just thinking.

Letting my mind wander through the shapes and colors I'd been playing with all morning.

Flowers. Petals. The way organic things curved and overlapped.

Lego's arrangements kept surfacing in my thoughts. The photos from this morning—those perfect pancakes, the bright bouquets at the shop. There was an artistry to the way Lego worked that I recognized, even if the medium was different. The same attention to composition. The same eye for color and balance.

The bus lurched to a stop. My stop.

I gathered my things and stepped out into the late morning sun.

Ink & Ashes was already alive when I arrived.

The neon sign glowed purple even in daylight—Tui never turned it off during business hours, said it was part of the aesthetic—and through the window I could see movement inside. The familiar silhouette of Tui at his station, bent over something. And another figure I didn't immediately recognize.

Right. The guest artist.

I'd almost forgotten.

The bell chimed as I pushed through the door, and Tui looked up.

"There he is." His voice was warm, welcoming. "I was starting to think Kevin had kidnapped you."

"He tried," I said. "I escaped."

Tui laughed—a short, genuine sound—and gestured toward the other person in the studio.

"Hong, this is Yuki. She's the artist from Osaka I mentioned. She'll be using the guest station for the next week."

Yuki turned to face me. She was small—shorter than Lego, even—with close-cropped black hair and sleeves of intricate tattoos running down both arms. Traditional Japanese style, I noticed. Waves and koi and delicate cherry blossoms, rendered in bold lines and careful shading.

"Nice to meet you," she said. Her Thai was accented but clear. "Tui has told me about your work. I'd love to see it sometime."

"Likewise." I said, and meant it.

We shook hands. Her grip was firm, professional. The handshake of someone who took their craft seriously.

"Yuki found us through Instagram," Tui explained. "She's doing a tour of Southeast Asian studios, learning different styles, building connections."

"Guest artist programs are important," Yuki added. "Every studio has something to teach. Every artist has a different approach."

I nodded. It was something Tui had been talking about more lately—the value of collaboration, of exposure to different techniques and traditions. Ink & Ashes was small, but it was building a reputation. Artists like Yuki seeking it out was proof of that.

"Make yourself at home," Tui told her. "Hong can show you where everything is if you need anything."

"Thank you."

She returned to her station—the guest area near the back, set up with her own equipment, her own designs spread across the counter. I caught a glimpse of her portfolio as I passed. Beautiful work. Precise and flowing at the same time.

I had a lot to learn.

The morning settled into routine.

I started with cleaning. The studio floor, swept and mopped until it gleamed. The waiting area, tidied and organized. The display cases in reception, dusted and rearranged. Tui ran a clean shop—cleanliness was non-negotiable in this business, both for safety and for the image it projected—and I'd learned early that maintaining standards was everyone's responsibility. Even the apprentice. Especially the apprentice.

The items for sale got particular attention. Aftercare kits, lined up neatly on the shelves. Sample designs in protective sleeves. And the merchandise—t-shirts, mostly, printed with original artwork from the studio's artists.

I paused at the baby tees.

I checked the inventory numbers.

Sold out in Size S.

Low stock in Size M.

They'd been my idea. A collaboration between my designs and Tui's business sense. Simple, stylish shirts in various colors, each featuring a small, elegant tattoo-inspired graphic. Flowers. Snakes. Abstract geometric patterns.

And they'd been selling. Really selling. Especially since—

I pulled out my phone and opened the online store dashboard.

The numbers made me smile. Since Lego had agreed to model them for the product photos, sales had increased by almost forty percent. There was something about the way Lego wore them—natural, unforced, genuinely happy—that made people want to buy. Not just the shirts, but the feeling the photos conveyed. Joy. Comfort. The sense that wearing this shirt would make you feel as good as the person in the picture looked. I made a mental note to thank Lego again. Maybe bring it up at lunch.

"Shorty's a natural." I muttered to myself.

It was good to see. He talked about modeling like it was a pipe dream, something silly he shouldn't focus on. But the numbers didn't lie. People liked looking at him.

I wasn't surprised. I liked looking at him too.

My own station came next.

It was small—just a chair, a counter, a lamp, the essential equipment—but it was mine. Tui had given it to me six months ago, when I'd graduated from pure observation to supervised practice. The sign of trust had meant more than I'd known how to express.

I wiped down every surface. Organized my inks by color. Checked my needles, my machine, my supplies. Everything in its place. Everything ready.

The front of the shop got a final sweep—the sidewalk outside, the entrance area, the little bench where clients sometimes waited for friends or rides. By the time I finished, the space looked exactly as it should: professional, welcoming, clean. I made myself a coffee from the machine in the back room and sat down to wait.

My first client arrived at noon.

Early twenties, nervous in the way first-timers often were, clutching a piece of paper with the design he wanted. Black lettering. A quote in English, something about time and memory. Simple. Clean. The kind of tattoo that was perfect for building confidence—both his and mine.

"You sure about the placement?" I asked, reviewing the design one final time. "Inner forearm, right here?"

"Yes." He nodded, then nodded again, like he was convincing himself. "Yes. That's where I want it."

"Okay. Let's do this."

The process was meditative.

I'd learned that early—the way tattooing required a particular kind of focus. Not the intense, burning concentration of an emergency, but something steadier. Calmer. The awareness of every small movement, every line being permanently etched into someone's skin. He was quiet during the session. Some clients talked constantly, filling the silence with nervous chatter. Others went still and internal, processing the sensation, the significance of what they were doing.

He was the second type.

I worked carefully. The letters formed one by one, black ink against skin, the words taking shape exactly as we'd planned. Time reveals what memory conceals. Not a quote I recognized, but it clearly meant something to him. That was what mattered.

When I finished, I cleaned the area, applied the protective covering, and handed him a mirror.

"What do you think?"

He stared at his arm for a long moment. His eyes were bright—not quite tears, but close. "It's perfect," he said softly. "It's exactly what I wanted."

Something warm settled in my chest. This was why I did this. Not just the art, but the connection. The trust someone placed in you when they let you mark their body permanently. The responsibility of getting it right.

"Before you go—" I reached for the display on my counter. "Let me show you the aftercare kit."

Selling the aftercare kit was part of the job.

Not in a pushy, commission-driven way—Tui would never tolerate that—but in a genuine, this-will-help-your-tattoo-heal-properly way. The kits contained everything a fresh tattoo needed: gentle cleanser, moisturizing balm, protective patches, detailed instructions.

Hesitated at first. The kit wasn't cheap.

"You can use regular products," I admitted. "But these are specifically formulated for new tattoos. No fragrances, no harsh chemicals. They'll help the ink settle properly and reduce the risk of scarring or fading."

"And they work?"

"Every tattoo I've done that healed perfectly? The client used the kit." I shrugged. "Correlation isn't causation, but still."

He laughed—a small, surprised sound—and reached for his wallet. "Okay. You've

convinced me."

I rang him up, gave him the kit, and walked him through the aftercare instructions one more time. Then I handed him a business card.

"Any questions, any concerns, you reach out. That's what we're here for."

"Thank you." He looked at his arm again, at the words now permanently part of him. "Really. Thank you."

After he left, I took a photo of the fresh tattoo—with his permission, of course—and filed it away for my portfolio. Another piece. Another satisfied client. Another small step forward.

The afternoon was slower.

I checked the online store again between tasks, watching the numbers tick up. Three more baby tee orders since this morning. A custom design request through the inquiry form. A five-star review on the shop's Google page, mentioning "the guy with the silver hair" who'd made the experience "comfortable and professional."

That was me.

I allowed myself a small moment of pride.

Tui caught me smiling at my phone and raised an eyebrow.

"Good news?"

"The baby tees are selling well." I showed him the dashboard. "Since Lego did the photos, we've nearly doubled our monthly average."

Tui nodded approvingly. "That kid has a presence. Natural model."

"That's what I thought."

"You should do more collaborations. Different products, different styles. See what else works."

It was good advice. Tui's advice usually was.

I pocketed my phone and went back to work.

The hours passed.

Yuki worked quietly at her station, her needle buzzing in steady rhythms, her clients leaving with beautiful traditional pieces that made me want to study her technique for hours. Tui handled a steady stream of consultations and appointments, his calm presence anchoring the whole space.

And I observed. Learned. Practiced on synthetic skin during the lulls. Made notes in my sketchbook about techniques I wanted to try.

Around four, my phone buzzed.

Lego.

I smiled at the screen. The emoji made something warm flutter in my chest.

I focused on finishing my tasks, cleaning my station, preparing for tomorrow. The day had been good. Productive. The kind of day that made me feel like I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

I didn't know yet what the evening would bring. Didn't know about the taxi pulling up to a darkened studio, the tear-streaked face, the story that would spill out in broken pieces.

Right now, I was just a tattoo artist finishing his shift, looking forward to dinner with a friend.

That was enough. That was more than enough.

Closing Time

The afternoon light had shifted to something golden by the time I finished cleaning my station.

Everything in place. Inks organized. Surfaces wiped down. The machine cleaned and stored properly. I ran through the mental checklist one more time—Tui had drilled it into me during my first weeks, the importance of ritual, of never cutting corners when it came to hygiene and organization. A messy station is a messy mind, he'd said. And a messy mind makes mistakes.

I hadn't forgotten.

With my own area squared away, I found myself drifting toward Yuki's station. She was in the final stages of her piece—a sleeve extension for a client who'd come all the way from Chiang Mai specifically to work with her. The design was traditional irezumi, waves and wind bars wrapping around the forearm, connecting to existing work that disappeared beneath the client's rolled-up sleeve.

I stood at a respectful distance, watching.

Yuki's technique was mesmerizing. Her movements were economical, precise—no wasted motion, no hesitation. The needle buzzed in steady, rhythmic pulses, and under her hands, the design came alive. The waves seemed to move, cresting and breaking across the client's skin.

There was so much I still had to learn.

"Hong."

Tui's voice came from behind me, and I turned.

He was standing near the front counter, his jacket already on, his bag slung over one shoulder. His expression was tight—not angry, but something else. Worried. Distracted.

"I need to leave early," he said.

I straightened immediately. "Is everything okay?"

"I don't know yet." He was already moving toward the door, keys jangling in his hand. "Can you close up for me tonight? Yuki's almost done with her last client, and then you just need to do the usual."

"Yes, of course. Don't worry."

He paused at the threshold, looking back at me with an expression I couldn't quite read.

"Thanks, Hong. I'll text you later."

And then he was gone, the door swinging shut behind him, the bell chiming his departure.

I stood there for a moment, staring at the space where he'd been.

Tui didn't leave early. Not ever, not for anything. He was the first one in and the last one out, every single day. The studio was his life, his purpose, the thing he'd built from nothing.

Something was wrong.

But there was nothing I could do about it now. I had a job to finish.

I returned to watching Yuki work.

The client—a man in his thirties, weathered face, patient demeanor—sat perfectly still as she completed the final details. The shading was exquisite, layers of grey and black building depth into the waves, creating the illusion of movement even on static skin.

"Almost there," Yuki murmured, more to herself than to anyone else.

I noticed the way she held herself as she worked. The straight spine, the steady breathing, the complete focus that blocked out everything except the needle and

the skin. It was a kind of meditation, I realized. A practice that went beyond technique into something almost spiritual.

That's what mastery looks like, I thought. That's what I'm working toward.

Another ten minutes passed.

Then Yuki sat back, stretched her neck, and nodded.

"Done."

The client's face transformed.

He'd been stoic throughout the session—hours of work, hours of pain, sitting still while someone permanently altered his body—but now emotion broke through. His eyes went bright. His mouth curved into a smile that seemed to come from somewhere deep.

"It's beautiful." he said, and his voice cracked slightly on the word.

Yuki bowed her head, a small, graceful acknowledgment. "Thank you for trusting me with your skin."

I grabbed a mirror so he could see the full piece—the new work flowing seamlessly into the old, the waves connecting and crashing across his arm like a living thing. He stared at his reflection for a long moment, turning his arm this way and that, taking in every detail.

"Can we take a picture?" he asked.

"Of course."

I helped them set up the shot—the client with his arm extended, Yuki standing beside him with her professional smile, the studio's signature neon sign glowing in the background. The image would probably end up on Instagram, tagged with the studio's handle, spreading their work to new audiences.

Good for business. Good for everyone.

After the photos, I guided the client toward the front counter.

"Before you go." I said, reaching for the display, "let me show you our aftercare kit."

This part was easier now.

The spiel had become natural—explaining the products, emphasizing the importance of proper healing, answering questions about what to expect in the coming weeks. The client listened attentively, nodding along, clearly invested in protecting the work he'd just received.

"And if you want something to commemorate the experience—" I gestured toward the merchandise display. "We have shirts designed by the studio artists."

He browsed for a moment, then pulled out a black tee with one of my designs—an abstract snake coiled around geometric shapes, subtle and stylish.

"This one." he said. "It's perfect."

I rang him up. Kit, shirt, and a generous tip that made me blink.

"Thank you." he said, gathering his purchases. "This has been incredible. I'll be back."

"We'll be here."

The door chimed as he left, and the studio fell quiet.

Yuki was cleaning her station with the same methodical precision she'd applied to the tattoo itself.

I watched her for a moment, then stepped closer.

"That was amazing work," I said. "The way you built up the shading—I've never seen anyone do it quite like that."

She looked up, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "Different schools teach different techniques. Osaka style emphasizes gradation. Layers upon layers, building depth slowly."

"I'd love to learn more. If you have time this week."

"I'd like that." She finished wiping down her counter and began packing away her personal equipment. "Tui mentioned you're still early in your practice. But your eye is good. You see things."

You see things.

It was a simple compliment, but it landed somewhere deep. Seeing was what I cared about most—not just the technical execution, but the understanding of why certain lines worked, why certain compositions succeeded, why some pieces felt alive and others fell flat.

"Thank you." I said.

"Thank me by keeping your eyes open. That's how you learn."

A car pulled up outside.

Through the window, I could see a group of people spilling out—young, fashionable,

waving enthusiastically at the studio. Yuki's friends, apparently. Other artists she'd connected with during her time in Bangkok, gathering to take her out for the evening.

She grabbed her bag and headed for the door.

"Same time tomorrow?" she asked, pausing at the threshold.

"I'll be here."

"Good. We'll work on shading techniques." She smiled—a real smile, warm and genuine. "Goodnight, Hong."

"Goodnight."

The bell chimed as she left, joining her friends on the sidewalk, their laughter audible even through the glass. I watched them pile back into the car, watched the taillights disappear down the street.

Then I was alone.

Closing the studio was a ritual I knew by heart.

I started at the back, working my way forward. Turning off equipment. Checking that all the machines were properly stored. Emptying the sharps containers, bagging the biohazard waste, making sure everything was ready for proper disposal.

The stations got a final wipe-down—mine, Yuki's, Tui's. The floors got a last sweep. The bathroom got checked, restocked, tidied. In the front, I counted the register, reconciled the day's sales, filed the receipts in the drawer where Tui would find them tomorrow. The display cases got straightened. The waiting area got one more pass with the vacuum. Finally, the lights. One by one, I switched them off—the back room, the tattoo floor, the hallway. I grabbed my backpack, checked that I had everything, and headed for the door.

The lock clicked into place behind me.

The street was quiet.

Evening had settled fully now, the sky a deep blue fading to black, the first stars appearing between the buildings. The air was cooler than it had been during the day, carrying the scents of food vendors and exhaust and the particular urban perfume of a city that never quite stopped moving.

I pulled out my phone to text Lego.

Almost done. Heading your way now.

But before I could send it, a taxi pulled up to the curb.

And everything changed.

The passenger door opened.

A figure stumbled out—small, unsteady, moving like someone in a dream. Or a nightmare.

It took me a moment to recognize Lego.

The white skirt was wrinkled, stained. The oversized sweater hung off one shoulder. The braids were coming undone, loose strands sticking to cheeks that were wet with tears.

And the eyes—

The eyes were the worst part. Empty. Hollow. Like something essential had been scooped out and discarded.

"I was just about to call you," I said, trying to smile, trying to pretend that my heart wasn't suddenly pounding with alarm.

The smile fell off my face.

Because Lego was looking at me, and I could see it now. The pallor beneath the skin. The slight tremor running through the whole body. The way one arm was cradled against the chest, protective, hiding something.

"What happened?" The words came out sharper than I intended. "Are you okay? You're pale, shorty." The nickname was a reflex. An attempt at normalcy. A desperate hope that if I acted like everything was fine, it might somehow become true.

Lego opened their mouth.

And what came out wasn't words.

It was a sound—raw and broken and animal. A wail that seemed to tear itself from somewhere deep, somewhere wounded, somewhere that had been holding together by threads that had finally snapped.

I moved without thinking.

"I'll call my sister, okay?" My voice was barely audible through the sobs. "She'll come for us in the car, okay? Everything's going to be alright." I didn't believe it.

Looking into Lego's eyes, I could see that they didn't believe it either.

But I said it anyway. Because sometimes that's all you can do.

Everything happened in the blink of an eye. One moment Lego was sobbing in my arms outside the studio. The next, we were in my sister's car, the city lights blurring past the windows. Then we were home, and she was kneeling in front of Lego with the first aid kit, her hands gentle and sure as she cleaned the cuts on those small feet. I watched from the doorway, feeling useless.

How did this happen? Who did this? What do I do?

The questions circled endlessly, but I kept them inside. Now wasn't the time for interrogation. Now was the time for quiet. For presence. For being there without demanding anything in return.

Lego sat in the kitchen chair like a broken doll, letting my sister work without protest. The tears had stopped, at least—dried to salt tracks on pale cheeks—but what replaced them was almost worse. A kind of emptiness. A hollowed-out stillness that made my chest ache.

"There." Ploy said finally, applying the last bandage. "They'll heal soon. Nothing too deep."

"I'm sorry." Lego whispered.

My sister's voice was warm, matter-of-fact. The same tone she used with Kevin when he scraped his knees.

Dinner was simple, some vegetables she'd had in the fridge. Nothing fancy, but warm and filling and exactly what was needed.

Kevin, predictably, was fascinated by Lego.

"You smell like flowers." he announced, abandoning his own plate to hover near our guest. "Why do you smell like flowers?"

"I work at a flower shop," Lego said. The voice was still thin, fragile, but there was a ghost of a smile there. "I spend all day with them."

"Can I see?" Kevin's eyes were huge. "Can I see the flowers?"

"Maybe someday. If your uncle brings you."

Kevin turned to me, vibrating with excitement. "Uncle Hong! Can we go? Can we go see the flowers?"

"We'll see, buddy."

"That means yes, right? That means yes!" Despite everything, I found myself smiling.

Children had a way of doing that. They didn't understand the weight that adults carried. They just saw a new person, a new possibility, a new adventure waiting to happen. Their joy was uncomplicated, untainted by the knowledge of how badly things could hurt.

Kavin spent the rest of dinner alternating between his food and questions for Lego: What's your favorite flower? Do you have a favorite color? Do you like dinosaurs? You should like dinosaurs. Dinosaurs are the best. Lego answered each question patiently, and I watched something in those hollow eyes slowly, slowly start to fill back in. Not healed. Nowhere close to healed.

But present. Here. Alive.

Lego left around ten.

I walked them to the door, watching the taxi pull up, feeling the reluctance in every step.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"I need to go home." Lego's voice was quiet but certain. "I need to sleep in my own bed. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah." It did. I understood the need for familiar spaces, for the comfort of your own walls around you. "Yeah, it makes sense."

"Thank you." Lego turned to look at me, and for a moment I saw something flicker in those eyes—gratitude, maybe, or something deeper. "For everything. For coming to get me. For not asking too many questions. For just... being here."

"That's what friends do."

The word hung between us. Friends. It felt both accurate and insufficient, like trying to describe the ocean as "some water."

"I'll come see you tomorrow, okay?" I said.

"Okay."

"Text me when you get home."

"I will."

I hugged Lego one last time—careful, gentle, mindful of the bruises I now knew were there—and watched the taxi pull away into the night.

The street felt very empty after.

Inside, the house was quiet.

My sister had put Kavin to bed while I was saying goodbye, and I could hear her moving around in the kitchen, cleaning up the last of the dinner dishes. I should help. I should be useful. Instead, I stood in the hallway, staring at nothing.

What happened?

The question wouldn't leave me alone.

I'd seen the bruises on Lego's wrist. The distinct pattern of fingers that had gripped too hard. The cuts on those small feet. The way Lego had flinched when I'd accidentally touched the left shoulder.

Someone had hurt Lego. Physically, deliberately hurt them.

And Lego had said William's name. Had said he threw me out and that wasn't the William I know and who are you?

The pieces were there. I just didn't want to put them together.

Because if I put them together, if I let myself see the picture they formed, then I would have to do something about it. And I didn't know what that something was.

Violence? The thought surfaced before I could stop it. The urge to find this person, this William, and make him understand what it felt like to be grabbed and thrown and discarded—No. That wasn't who I was. That wasn't who I wanted to be.

But the anger was there, burning low and steady in my chest, and I didn't know what to do with it.

I changed into my pajamas on autopilot. Soft pants, an old t-shirt, the comfort of familiar fabric against my skin. My room was small but mine—a desk covered in sketches, a bed that was slightly too short, a window that looked out onto the quiet street.

I was reaching for the light switch when I heard footsteps in the hall.

She appeared in the doorway, leaning against the frame with her arms crossed. She was still in her work clothes, but her hair was down now, falling around her shoulders in waves that reminded me of our mother.

"How about donuts?" she asked.

The question was so unexpected that it took me a moment to process.

"What?"

"Donuts. Tomorrow morning. For breakfast with Lego." She tilted her head, studying

me with that particular look she had—the one that said she saw more than I wanted her to see. "There's a new shop near the bus stop. I have a coupon."

She held out a small slip of paper. Buy one dozen, get six free. A cartoon donut smiled up at me from the corner, obliviously cheerful. I took the coupon, turning it over in my hands.

"I—"

"Everything will be alright." Her voice was firm, certain. The voice of an older sister who had spent years convincing me that the world wasn't as scary as it sometimes seemed. "Just supporting your friends is a great action. Sometimes that's all you can do. Be there. Show up. Bring donuts."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to say that donuts weren't going to fix whatever had happened to Lego tonight, that showing up wasn't enough, that I should be doing more, being more, fixing things somehow—But I didn't say any of that.

Because maybe she was right. Maybe showing up was the most important thing. Maybe being there, consistently, reliably, without expectation or agenda—maybe that was what actually mattered.

"I'm glad you have more friends, by the way."

I looked up at her. "What?"

"Friends." A small smile played at the corners of her mouth. "People you care about. People who care about you. I was starting to think you'd be alone with your tattoos forever."

"Sis—"

"Getting old and grey and covered in ink, with only your machines for company—"

"I'm already grey."

"Silver." she corrected. "Distinguished silver. Very different." She pushed off from the doorframe, still smiling. "Goodnight, little brother."

"Goodnight." She disappeared down the hallway, her footsteps fading toward her own room.

I stood there for a moment, holding the donut coupon, feeling something loosen in my chest.

My phone was on the nightstand where I'd left it. I climbed into bed, pulling the sheets up around me, and checked my messages one last time.

Lego: Just got in. Going to sleep.

I typed back:

Me: Goodnight, Lego. You're going to be okay.

There was a pause. Then:

Lego: Goodnight, Hong.

I set the phone aside and stared at the ceiling.

Such a small thing. Such a simple gesture.

But it meant something. I'm here. I'm still here. Despite everything, I'm still reaching out.

Tomorrow I would bring donuts. Tomorrow I would sit in Lego's apartment and let them talk or not talk, whatever they needed. Tomorrow I would figure out how to help, how to be the friend that Lego deserved. But tonight, I was exhausted.

Tonight, I just needed to sleep.

I pulled the sheets higher and closed my eyes.

The anger was still there, banked but not extinguished. The worry was still there, a low hum beneath my thoughts. The questions were still there, circling endlessly without answers.

But underneath all of that, something else.

Gratitude.

For my sister, who had welcomed a stranger into her home without question. For Kevin, who had made Lego smile with his dinosaur obsession. For the simple fact that Lego had come to me, had trusted me enough to fall apart in my presence.

I'm glad you have more friends.

Maybe that was what I was learning. That life wasn't meant to be lived alone. That the walls I'd built around myself—the focus on work, the careful distance from emotional entanglement—weren't protection. They were just isolation wearing a different mask.

Lego had cracked those walls. Without trying, without pushing, just by being genuinely, openly themselves.

I didn't know what tomorrow would bring. Didn't know how to help someone heal from whatever had happened tonight. Didn't know if donuts and presence and consistency would be enough. But I was going to try.

That was all I could do. That was all any of us could do.

Sleep came slowly. But when it finally arrived, it was deep and dreamless, and I woke to morning light with the donut coupon still clutched in my hand.

Next day

7:20

I woke before the alarm.

The room was still grey with early morning light, that soft pre-dawn glow that made everything feel suspended, not quite real.

But sleep was gone, and I knew better than to chase it.

I lay there for a moment, staring at the ceiling, letting the events of last night settle into something I could carry. The tears. The bruises. The hollow look in Lego's eyes. The taxi disappearing into the darkness. Today, I thought. Today I show up. The donut coupon was still on my nightstand where I'd left it. I picked it up, looked at the cheerful cartoon, and tucked it into my wallet. Then I got out of bed.

My brain was already buzzing, running through the checklist for the day. Donuts. Lego. Studio. Tui. University.

The shower helped.

Hot water, steam, the ritual of washing away the residue of sleep and worry. I stood under the spray longer than necessary, letting the heat work into my muscles, loosening the tension I hadn't realized I was carrying.

By the time I stepped out, I felt more human.

Getting dressed was automatic—I reached for familiar things, comfortable things. A t-shirt from my favorite band, the fabric soft and worn from years of washing. Ripped jeans, the tears genuine rather than manufactured. A grey hoodie that I left unzipped, because the morning would be cool but the afternoon wouldn't. I checked my reflection briefly. Silver hair still damp, falling across my forehead. The usual rings on my fingers. Dark circles under my eyes that were probably inevitable at this point.

Good enough, I decided. I grabbed my backpack—already packed from last night, ready to go—and headed downstairs.

The house was quiet.

Early morning quiet, the particular stillness of a home where everyone else was still asleep. I moved carefully, trying not to disturb anyone, my feet silent on the stairs.

The living room was dim, curtains still drawn. Kavin's toys were scattered across the floor where he'd left them—dinosaurs engaged in some elaborate battle that had been interrupted by bedtime. I stepped around them, navigating the obstacle course with practiced ease. The hallway to the bedrooms was dark. I paused, listening.

Footsteps.

Ploy emerged from the shadows, her hair a mess, her eyes barely open. She was wearing the same robe she'd had since before Kavin was born—faded blue, slightly too big, impossibly comfortable-looking.

"You're up early," she mumbled, not quite forming the words properly.

"Couldn't sleep."

She made a vague noise of acknowledgment and continued toward Kavin's room. I watched her go, then headed for the kitchen.

I left my backpack on one of the dining room chairs.

The kitchen was my domain this morning—a rare occurrence that would probably alarm everyone. I wasn't much of a cook, but breakfast I could manage. Breakfast was simple. Breakfast was just assembly. The bread went into the toaster. Two slices for me, two for Ploy, and I'd wait to see what Kavin wanted before committing his. The coffee maker came next—ground beans, water, the familiar gurgle and hiss as it started brewing.

I opened the refrigerator. Milk for Kavin. Juice—orange, his favorite. Some butter and jam that I set on the counter. The toaster popped. I arranged the slices on a plate, found the butter dish, located a knife.

Footsteps behind me.

Ploy appeared in the doorway with Kavin in her arms. They were both still in pajamas—Ploy in a matching set with little moons on them, Kavin in his dinosaur onesie from last night. They had matching expressions too: sleepy, slightly confused, not quite ready to engage with the world.

"Good morning, Uncle Hong," Kavin said, his voice scratchy with sleep.

"Good morning, tiny terror."

Ploy blinked at the table. Toast popped up. Coffee steamed in the pot. Juice poured. She smiled, and it was the real kind—the kind that crinkled the corners of her eyes and made her look ten years younger.

"So you're making us breakfast today?" she teased, shifting Kavin to her hip. "Is this

the end of the world? Should I check for zombies outside?"

"I just woke up early." I said defensively, grabbing the toast before it got cold. I set the plate on the table, careful to keep the hot coffee mug out of Kevin's reach. "Eat it before I change my mind."

Ploy laughed and sat down, settling Kevin in his booster seat. She reached for the remote and clicked on the small TV in the corner. The morning news hummed to life—traffic reports, weather, the usual drone.

Kevin eyed his toast with deep suspicion. He poked it with one finger. "It's crunchy." he accused.

"It's toast." I said. "That's the point." He looked at me, His expression was distinctly unimpressed.

"We have cereal too." I offered, grabbing the box of colorful loops from the pantry.

His face lit up like a sunrise. "Yes please!"

I poured him a bowl. Ploy poured herself coffee. I crunched on my toast.

For twenty minutes, the only drama was a tipped glass of orange juice that I caught mostly with a paper towel before it hit the floor. Ploy wiped up the rest without pausing her conversation about her work schedule next week.

"Victory." I murmured, watching Kevin chase a rogue cereal loop around his bowl.

"Hm?" Ploy looked up.

"Breakfast." I said. "First victory of the day. No meltdowns. No burns. Minimal spillage."

Ploy grinned. "I'll take it. Now, about those donuts..."

"I'm going." I said, standing up to clear the plates. "Right after I walk the menace to school."

"You're a good uncle." she said.

"I'm an okay uncle." I corrected. "But I'm a great donut delivery guy."

It was a good start. The sun was fully up now, streaming through the kitchen window. I felt ready. Ready for donuts. Ready for Lego. Ready to fix whatever I could, one sugar-coated ring at a time.

"The coupon's for a dozen and six free." She smiled. "That's a lot of donuts."

"I'll bring you some."

"You better." She stood, stretching, her joints popping in a way that made her wince. "I need to get this one ready for school."

Donuts. Lego. Studio. Tui. University.

The list formed in my mind as I watched Ploy disappear down the hallway with Kavin, his protests about getting dressed echoing off the walls. But I want to wear the dinosaur shirt again! And Ploy's patient response: It's in the laundry, baby. Pick something else.

I pulled out my phone. The studio first. I needed to let Tui know I wouldn't be in today—something that felt strange, foreign. I rarely missed days. The studio was my anchor, my purpose, the place where I was building something that mattered.

But today, Lego mattered more.

I opened the chat with Tui and typed carefully.

Me: I won't be going today, personal problems. Hope everything is okay with you having to leave early yesterday. Say hi to Yuki, good luck.

No emojis. No casual tone. I wanted him to understand that this was serious—that something had happened, that I wasn't just sleeping in or blowing off work.

I stared at the message for a moment before hitting send. Personal problems. It felt inadequate. But I didn't know how to explain what had happened last night—didn't know if it was my story to tell. Lego's tears, Lego's bruises, Lego's hollow eyes. Those belonged to Lego, not to me. I could only offer my presence. And that meant not being at the studio today. The message sent with a soft whoosh.

Tui's reply came a few minutes later.

Tui: Take care of yourself. Yesterday was... complicated. We'll talk later.

I noticed he didn't explain the early departure. Complicated. That was a word that covered a lot of ground.

But that was a problem for another time.

Lego's chat showed active now.

8:00 AM. Early, especially for someone who'd had the night Lego had. But maybe sleep hadn't come easily. Maybe the familiar walls of home hadn't been enough to quiet whatever was churning inside. I typed:

Me: Hey, good morning.

I stared at the screen, watching the three dots appear, disappear, appear again.

Lego: Good morning.

Lego: [Location Pin Attached]

Lego: Apartment 402.

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. He hadn't said don't come. He hadn't said I'm fine alone. He'd sent me his address.

I clicked the pin. It was close to the university bus stop. That made sense. I'd always wondered how he managed to look so put-together for 8 AM lectures when I was barely conscious. Proximity was a superpower.

I dropped Kavin at the kindergarten gate—"Be good, menace." "Bye Uncle Hong!"—Kavin hugged me goodbye with his usual fierce enthusiasm, then ran through the gates without looking back, already absorbed in the social world of four-year-olds and headed for the bus stop.

The donut shop Ploy mentioned was right there. Glaze & Glory. It smelled like melted sugar and yeast, a scent so good it should be illegal.

A small storefront with a bright pink awning and a cartoon donut mascot grinning from the window display. The kind of place that looked almost aggressively cheerful, like it was determined to make you smile whether you wanted to or not. Inside—sugar and fried dough and something warm and yeasty that made my stomach growl despite the toast I'd had for breakfast. The display case was overwhelming. Glazed. Chocolate. Sprinkled. Filled with cream or jam or custard. Fancy ones with elaborate toppings. Simple ones with just a dusting of powdered sugar.

I bought a dozen.

The bus was crowded.

Morning commuters, students, people heading to work. I found a spot near the back and held the donut box carefully, trying not to jostle it too much. The bus lurched and swayed, but the donuts remained intact.

Small victories.

At the university stop, a few familiar faces boarded. Classmates from my design courses, people I knew by sight if not by name. We exchanged nods, brief greetings, the casual acknowledgments of people who shared space but not necessarily lives.

"Hong! Haven't seen you around lately." One of them—a girl with bright red hair whose name I was pretty sure was Mint—paused beside my seat. "You've been busy?"

"Work," I said. "The studio."

"Right, right. The tattoo thing." She smiled. "That's so cool. I keep saying I'm going to come get something done."

"You should. I'll give you a discount." She laughed and moved on, finding a seat further back.

Lego's building was... nice.

I stood on the sidewalk and snapped a photo, sending it to him.

Me: [Photo attached] Outside. Nice place.

It was a tall, modern high-rise. Clean lines, glass balconies. Definitely a step up from my place, and miles away from the cramped student dorms I'd assumed he lived in. I knew he worked hard—the flower shop, the modeling gigs—but rent in this area wasn't cheap.

The lobby was cool and quiet. A wall of mailboxes greeted me, sleek metal rows. I found 402. Empty. He checked his mail. Good.

I took the elevator up. It was fast and silent, unlike the rattling death trap in my building.

The hallway on the 4th floor smelled like fabric softener. I counted the doors until I found it.

402.

You couldn't miss it.

While the other doors were uniform and blank, Lego's had personality. A small wooden sign hung from a hook, painted with a smiling teddy bear holding a "Welcome!" banner. The doormat wasn't the standard bristly brown rectangle; it was shaped like three cartoon kittens huddled together, with the words WIPE YOUR PAWS written in cheerful script.

I smiled, shaking my head. Of course.

I adjusted my grip on the donut box, took a deep breath, and knocked. Three raps. Not too loud.

The door opened.

I had prepared myself for tears. For hollow eyes and trembling hands, for the ghost of the person I'd held outside the studio last night. I'd braced for fragility, for the careful handling that broken things required.

Instead, I found freckles.

Lego's face was clean—no makeup, no careful concealment. Just skin, slightly damp from a recent shower, dotted with a constellation of light brown spots across the nose and cheeks that I'd never noticed before. Hidden, usually, beneath whatever subtle products Lego used to face the world. But not today. Today, everything was bare.

The hair was in braids again—two of them, neat and still damp, dark against the fabric of... were those Care Bears?

They were. A pajama set printed with the pastel cartoon bears from our childhoods, soft and worn and clearly beloved. The pants pooled slightly around bare feet, and the top was just big enough to slip off one shoulder.

Lego looked young. Soft. Unexpectedly okay.

And then Lego was hugging me.

The embrace came without warning—arms wrapping around my torso, face pressing into my chest, the whole small body colliding with mine in a way that forced me to quickly lift the donut box out of crushing range.

"Whoa—" I laughed, adjusting my grip. "I missed you too."

Lego pulled back, cheeks slightly pink, a smile playing at the corners of that bare mouth.

"Sorry. I just—" A small shrug. "Thank you. For coming."

"I brought donuts."

"I can see that." The smile widened, and something in my chest loosened. "Come in."

The apartment was a revelation.

I stepped through the door and stopped, taking it in. The space was open-plan—larger than I'd expected, larger than the first floor of my house—with high ceilings and windows that let in the morning light. But it wasn't the size that caught my attention.

It was everything else.

Stuffed animals everywhere. On the couch, on the chairs, arranged in neat rows on

shelves and scattered in casual piles on the floor. Bears and bunnies and cats and creatures I couldn't identify, in every color and size imaginable.

Blankets draped over every surface—soft throws in pastel pinks and lavenders, heavier quilts folded at the foot of the bed, a particularly fluffy one that looked like it might be made of actual clouds. Books overflowed from a massive bookshelf that dominated one wall—novels and manga and art books and what looked like textbooks, crammed together without any apparent system. Things were tucked between them: small figurines, dried flowers, photographs in mismatched frames. The whole space was warm. Soft. A little childlike in a way that felt deliberate, chosen. A sanctuary built from gentle things.

Kavin would love this, I thought. He'd never want to leave.

The kitchen was open to the living space—modern appliances, clean counters, a few plants in colorful pots on the windowsill. A small table sat nearby, clearly repurposed as a desk. Three chairs surrounded it, but only the clutter of work occupied the surface: a laptop, notebooks, textbooks bristling with sticky-note flags, pencils gathered in a cup shaped like a flower.

I moved closer, curious.

A drawing sat among the papers. Unfinished, done in black pencil, experimental in its style. A flower—not realistic, not quite abstract, but something in between. Bold lines and delicate shading, the petals half-formed, still becoming.

"That's just a sketch." Lego said quickly, appearing beside me. "Nothing serious."

"It's good."

"It's practice." But there was a pleased flush creeping up those freckled cheeks. "I'm trying to learn."

I looked at the flower again. The lines were confident despite being incomplete. There was something alive in them, something that moved.

Music played softly in the background. Japanese, I realized after a moment. A woman's voice, gentle and melodic, accompanied by acoustic guitar. I didn't understand the words, but the feeling was clear—something wistful, something hopeful.

"I like your place." I said, still taking it all in. The bed in the corner, made with military precision, piled high with even more stuffed animals. The bathroom door, closed. The walk-in closet, door open, revealing what looked like a carefully organized collection of clothes.

"It's small." Lego said, almost apologetically.

"It's you." I meant it. Every inch of this space reflected the person who lived here—the softness, the warmth, the careful curation of comfort. "It feels like you."

Lego's expression did something complicated. Surprise, maybe. Gratitude. Something that looked almost like wonder.

I lifted the donut box, breaking the moment before it could become too heavy.

"I believe I promised breakfast."

Lego's face lit up.

Not the hollow look from last night. Not the brittle smile of someone holding themselves together. A real, genuine, radiant expression that made something in my chest feel suddenly too tight.

"Donuts." Lego breathed, like I'd offered treasure.

"Eighteen of them, had a coupon."

"Eighteen?"

"I got a variety." I set the box on the counter and flipped it open. "But there are at least two with sprinkles, because I made a promise to my nephew and I figured you'd appreciate them too."

Lego peered into the box with the intensity of someone making a very important decision. Fingers hovered over the selection—glazed, chocolate, cream-filled, the promised sprinkled ones—before finally selecting a pink-frosted specimen covered in rainbow jimmies.

"Perfect." Lego declared.

"Coffee?" I asked, spotting the maker on the counter, clearly recently used.

"I already started some. But—" A pause. A slight hesitation. "You can help me make more?"

It was a question. An invitation. An offer of something small and domestic and surprisingly intimate.

"Sure," I said. "Show me how you like it."

Making coffee together was simple. Lego moved around the small kitchen with practiced ease, pulling mugs from a cabinet one shaped like a cat, one with a floral pattern, retrieving milk from the refrigerator, adjusting the machine's settings.

I watched. Learned. Noticed the way Lego's hands were steady now—no trembling, no hesitation. Whatever had broken last night had been, if not healed, at least

bandaged. Rested. Given enough care to function again.

"How do you take yours?" Lego asked.

"Black."

A raised eyebrow. "Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"That's so..." The search for the right word was visible on that expressive face.

"...intense."

I laughed. "It's just coffee."

"Black coffee is a statement." Lego poured a cup for me, then began doctoring another with what I could only describe as an alarming amount of milk. Splash after splash, until the liquid went from dark brown to something approaching beige.

"That's a statement." I said, watching.

"It's perfect." Lego took a sip, eyes closing in satisfaction. "It barely tastes like coffee."

"Then why not just drink milk?"

"Because then I wouldn't get the caffeine."

I couldn't argue with that logic.

We settled into the couch with the donuts between us.

The box was slowly being demolished—Lego on a second one now, chocolate glazed, and I'd worked through one with custard filling that was better than it had any right to be. The music played softly in the background, something gentle in Japanese, and the morning light filled the apartment with warmth. The stuffed animals watched from their various perches. Silent witnesses to our breakfast. It should have felt awkward. We should have been talking about last night, about William, about the bruises I knew were hidden beneath those Care Bear sleeves.

But we weren't.

We were just... being. Existing in the same space. Sharing sugar and caffeine and the simple comfort of not being alone.

I looked at Lego—really looked—and saw someone who had chosen softness as armor. Who had built a sanctuary out of gentle things. Who had been hurt last night

but was still here, still present, still reaching out. Still wearing Care Bears and eating donuts at the morning.

Something in my chest shifted.

Not pity. Not the urge to fix or protect or rescue.

Something warmer. Something that felt like recognition.

This is who you are, I thought. Someone who survives by being soft. Someone who builds nests of comfort. Someone who invites people in even after being thrown out.

"So..." I kept my voice light. Casual. Giving him an out if he didn't want to talk about it. "How are you feeling?"

Lego swallowed, licking a bit of pink frosting from his lip. He looked at the donut, then at me.

"Better." he said. And this time, it sounded like the truth. "Being here helps. Seeing you helps."

"Good." I bumped my knee against his gently. "Because we have class in two hours."

Lego grinned—a real grin, one that reached his eyes. "That's what the sugar is for."

For a moment, the lightness held. We ate. We sipped our coffees. The music shifted to something slightly more upbeat.

Then Lego set down the donut.

It started slowly.

A word here. A sentence there. The story came out in fragments, like Lego was testing each piece before releasing it into the air.

The waiting outside William's apartment. The manager arriving with workers. The door finally opening, and what he'd found inside.

"He looked like a different person." Lego said, his voice going thin. "Like something had broken inside him and rearranged all the pieces wrong." The confrontation. The harsh words. The way William had grabbed his wrist and dragged him toward the door.

"I just wanted to help. I just wanted to see if he was okay. And he looked at me like I was—like I was nothing. Like I was something he needed to get rid of."

The doorframe. The stumbling. The door slamming shut.

"I asked him who he was." Lego whispered, and the tears were coming now, spilling over, tracking down those freckled cheeks. "Because that wasn't William. That wasn't my friend. That wasn't—" The voice cracked.

I watched, helpless, as Lego's lips trembled. As the weight of everything that had happened pressed down, visible and heavy.

"I don't know what to do." Lego said finally, almost crying, the words barely audible. "I don't know how to help him. I don't know how to help myself. I don't know—"

I handed over the tissues I'd brought—the packet from my backpack, the one I'd learned to always carry. Lego took them gratefully, blowing his nose with a sound that was almost a laugh.

"Sorry." Lego mumbled. "I keep crying on you."

"That's what I'm here for." Another hug. This one longer, tighter, Lego's face pressed into my shoulder until the trembling stopped.

Then Lego pulled back, wiped his eyes, and took a breath. "I need to change. For university."

"Take your time."

I stayed on the couch while Lego moved toward the closet.

To give him privacy, I turned away, looking at the bookshelf, the plants, the careful arrangement of soft things that made up this sanctuary. I complained about the upcoming art history class—something to fill the silence, to give Lego the space to collect himself.

"Professor Kim assigns so much reading." I said, my back still turned. "I swear she thinks we don't have other classes. Last week it was three chapters plus a comparative essay on—" I turned.

And stopped.

Lego was facing away from me.

The Care Bear pajama top was off, discarded on the bed. The long-sleeved shirt he was reaching for hung from his fingers, not yet pulled on.

And I could see his back.

His shoulder. His arm. The skin along his ribs near his hip.

Bruises.

Not just the wrist. Not just the marks I'd seen last night. These were everywhere—

scattered across his left side like a map of violence, dark purples and angry reds and the sickly yellow-green of healing damage.

Some were clearly from the doorframe. The impact. The stumble.

But others...Others looked like they came from fingers. From grabbing. From holding too hard, too rough, too cruel.

"Shit, Lego."

The words escaped before I could stop them. I was off the couch, crossing the apartment, standing behind him before I'd made the conscious decision to move.

Lego turned.

His eyes were nervous. Wide. The expression of someone caught, exposed, vulnerable in a way he hadn't planned.

"They don't hurt anymore." he said quickly. Trying to reassure me. Trying to make it smaller than it was. "Really. They look worse than they feel."

I didn't believe him.

I couldn't believe him.

Because I was looking at his body—at the evidence of what had been done to him—and all I could feel was a cold, burning rage that settled into my bones and refused to leave.

Lego finished getting dressed. A thin, tight-fitting grey t-shirt with long sleeves that wouldn't reveal his skin. Jeans. Converse sneakers—flat, practical, no platforms today. I noticed the choice, Laced up Converse sneakers instead of his usual platforms, sensible, protecting his feet. The deliberate coverage. The way he was hiding what had been done to him.

I sat on the bed, surrounded by stuffed animals, and tried to breathe through the anger. Lego joined me after a moment. We lay back together, staring at the ceiling, my feet still touching the floor. The morning light had shifted, casting new shadows across the room.

The music had stopped at some point. I hadn't noticed when.

"I don't know him." I said finally. "But I hate him."

Lego turned to look at me. Those big eyes, still slightly red from crying, fixed on my face.

"Est and you have only said terrible things about him." I continued. The words came out harder than I intended, but I couldn't soften them. "He's unstable. He's

reclusive. He treats people like disposable objects. He clearly needs psychological intervention, Lego. This isn't just... artistic temperament. This is dangerous."

I didn't know what to expect. Defensiveness, maybe. Excuses. The kind of loyalty that people clung to even when it hurt them. I waited for the defense. For the: you don't understand or he's just going through a hard time.

Instead, Lego just nodded. "I know."

The acceptance was quiet. Resigned. The sound of someone who had reached the same conclusion long ago but hadn't known what to do with it.

"I know he needs help, He doesn't take his medication." Lego said. "He only ever took it when his mother was alive."

His eyes had drifted to something across the room.

I followed his gaze and found a photograph. It was small—tucked between books on the shelf, easy to miss if you weren't looking for it. A woman with William's eyes, smiling at the camera. Auntie, I assumed. The one Lego had mentioned. The one whose death had started William's retreat from the world. I looked around the apartment again, seeing it with new eyes.

There were almost no family photos. The walls were decorated with art prints, with pressed flowers, with fabric hangings in soft colors. The shelves held books and toys and treasures. But pictures of people—of parents, of relatives, of the family that had shaped Lego into who he was—were notably absent.

Just some photos of William's mother.

Nothing else.

What happened to your family? I wanted to ask. Where are they? Why aren't they here?

The realization hit me hard. Lego had built this sanctuary for himself because he had nowhere else to put his love. No family photos on the walls. Just William's mother. And William.

"He stopped when she died?" I asked.

Lego nodded. "She was the only one who could make him. Who he listened to. When she was gone... everything else went with her."

But Lego's eyes were distant now, fixed on that single photograph, and I knew this wasn't the moment. Some stories took time to tell.

We lay there on Lego's bed, surrounded by stuffed animals. The ceiling was painted a pale lavender—I noticed that now. Soothing. Deliberate. Another soft thing in a

room full of soft things.

"What time is it?" Lego asked eventually.

I checked my phone. "Almost twelve."

"We should go soon."

"Yeah."

Neither of us moved.

The world outside the apartment was waiting—university and classes and all the ordinary obligations of life. But here, in this nest of comfort, those things felt distant. Abstract.

Just a little longer, I thought. Just a few more minutes of peace before we have to face it.

Lego seemed to feel the same way. He turned onto his side, one arm wrapped around a stuffed bear, looking at me with an expression I couldn't quite read.

"Thank you." he said. "For being here. For not—" He hesitated. "For not pushing. For just... being."

"That's what friends do."

The word sat between us. Friends. It felt accurate and insufficient at the same time. But for now, it was enough.

"We should go." I said finally, sitting up. The stuffed animals shifted around me, displaced by the movement.

Lego sat up too, reaching for his bag. "Yeah. We should."

At the door, he paused.

His shoes were on. His bag was packed. The apartment waited behind him, soft and safe.

"Will you come back?" Lego asked.

"If you want me to."

"I do."

"Then I will." Lego smiled—small, genuine, still a little fragile around the edges. We stepped out into the hallway together, leaving the sanctuary behind.

The world was waiting.

But at least we didn't have to face it alone.